

## make me a real girl by norgaard

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**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Max & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler

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**Summary:**

scenes from a coming of age.

rated T for language

## make me a real girl

### Author's Note:

title from "prince johnny" by st. vincent

Spring doesn't come fast enough for El.

This past winter's been mild, especially compared to those long, cold, desperate months of that first year. But even with holidays and wood-burning stoves and smiles shared over hot drinks, when the trees around the cabin start sprouting their hopeful green buds, El can't help but feel that she's blooming, too.

The cold feels less biting than usual as she hangs on tight to Mike's waist, the wind whipping through both of their hair as his bike crests a hill and they glide down, down. El leans to rest her temple on his back, presses her nose into his fluffy jacket, and yearns for the summer months ahead, where they'll be doing the exact same thing, except warmer and brighter and louder. Mike lets out a breathless laugh as they speed through the streets, and El feels the world warm a little.

Beside them, the woods blur into shades of brown and green, and she thinks, *soon, soon*.

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El loves the feeling of her hair. She twirls it around her finger, sticks barrettes in it, ties it up in something Joyce calls a scrunchie (she repeats the word over to herself, scrunchie, scrunchie, loving the way it sounds on her lips).

Her favorite, though, is wearing it down -- loose so Hopper can ruffle it, so the curls catch and float in the breeze, so Mike can tuck it behind her ear and make her blush.

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Hopper used to complain when El left her bedroom window open overnight, especially on cool spring mornings like this, where the shade of the trees keeps the the cabin blanketed in the cold long after the sun rises. The chill creeps into the cabin, and in the morning Hopper's breath comes out in puffs of air as he swears under his breath.

They realize, though, that El sleeps better on those nights -- fewer nightmares, fewer sweaty blankets to toss back in an effort to get free, get away, I said *let go* --

He starts cracking the window open for her before she goes to bed. His breath still fogs in the morning, but he doesn't complain once.

So El wakes to the hushed stillness of the forest, her half-asleep mind envisioning the trees and plants glistening with dew: cocooning the cabin like her favorite blanket, keeping them safe, and she rolls over to go back to sleep.

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El begs and begs and begs, and Hopper relents. (Not that he was ever going to put up much of a fight. Not on this front, anyway.)

So she finds herself squeezed in between him and Joyce on the bleachers of the middle school field, the sunlight reflecting off the metal and making her glad that Hopper had insisted on sunglasses as a meager disguise. She's practically vibrating with excitement, and has to will herself to calm down so nearby objects don't go floating off into space. (She feels like she might do just that, too). Hopper puts his hand on top of hers to stop her from drumming her fingers on the bench with anticipation.

Graduation is the word of the day. El got the pronunciation right on the first try.

She scans the crowd for her friends as the man standing up front drones on, spotting Dustin's mass of curls easily, Will up front, fidgeting with his cap, Lucas and Mike making faces at one another from the opposite ends of their row. She would be next to Dustin, she knows, because H-O is close to H-E. Her bubble of excitement grows heavy. What would it be like if she were out there with them? Is the gown hot in the June heat? Would she be nervous? Excited? Both? What would her mama look like, sitting here in the stands?

El pushes those thoughts away. Today is for her friends. She cheers loudly as each of their names are called, laughs when Lucas raises a fist in triumph after receiving his fancy piece of paper. (She makes a mental note to ask Hopper if there's a name for that.) She watches the caps fly up, up in the air, and hugs her friends tightly afterwards.

But she wants to be out there, too, someday. She can already see how Jane Hopper will look on that fancy piece of paper.

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As long as El plugs her ears during the fireworks, they're actually quite nice.

She takes her eyes off of the lights glittering in the July night sky to see their colors reflected on Mike's upturned, awed face, and finds that she likes them even better this way.

*Pretty* , she thinks.

When she puts her head on his shoulder, she can hear Max and the boys pretend to gag and vomit behind them, but she stays put, even when Mike shifts his weight so he can raise a hand to flip them off.

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The burning, bubbling resentment El feels towards Max has cooled into something closer to indifference. Mostly she reminds El of that time she got a rock stuck in her shoe, but every time she went to take it out, there was nothing to be found: not of particular interest, except for the occasional spark of irritation.

That is, until Max tries to teach them how to skateboard.

Tries is the key word, because for all of the boys' pleading and whining, when Max finally relents in giving them a lesson, they spend most of the warm summer afternoon struggling to move more than a few feet without losing their balance. El sits on the curb with Will, both of them idly plucking blades of grass, using her hand to shield her eyes from the steadily dipping sun to watch as Dustin climbs on the board for another go, heedless of the abused skin of his knees and heels of his hands from previous attempts.

He's picking up speed, rounding around the cul-de-sac, feeling confident enough to look up from the road and cheer his triumph, when suddenly the board catches on a fallen branch and sends him flying several feet into the air, and he comes down to earth with a loud swear.

In the second that it takes Lucas to exclaim "Oh shit!", they've all gone into full-on panic mode, already moving to help Dustin. But Max is there first, somehow. The zoomer.

"Fuck, shit, are you okay?" she asks, concern bleeding through her tone as she fusses over Dustin, offering him a hand up although he's already climbed back to his feet, checking him for blood or injuries over his assurances that he's fine, Max, it's fine.

There seems to be a collective exhale, and the boys laugh with relief. As they crack jokes to ease the cloud of worry that still lingers ("God, Max, I didn't realize you were such a mom!" "Yeah, when are you gonna file those adoption papers again?"), El's struck with the realization that Max really, truly, loves her friends. That much is

evident in the reluctance in her steps back from Dustin, how she laughs at the boys' bad jokes but still eyes him nervously as he hops on the board to prove that yes, Jesus, Max, he's really okay.

As they settle down, Mike looks her way from across the street, always so attuned to her, and offers her a half-smile. She gives one back, feeling lighter, somehow.

For the rest of the afternoon, El watches Max, appreciating for the first time how she really listens when Will talks, the way she goes toe to toe with Lucas when he's being stubborn, her surprised laughter at Dustin's dumb jokes. When their shadows begin to stretch away from the sun in earnest, they finally decide to call it quits, their shouted plans for tomorrow echoing through the street as they leave. Max waves goodbye, but before she can turn to grab her skateboard and begin her long journey home, El steps forward and gives her a hug.

Max is still for a moment, before she hesitantly and briefly returns the gesture. When she steps away, she lets her hair fall in her face, trying to conceal her grin, and tears off into the waning daylight.

El decides she isn't so bad.

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Eggos will always be her favorite, but after her first trip to 7-11, in which Mike sends her into peals of laughter by showing off his blue tongue, El thinks Slurpees might just be a close second.

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When Dustin comes flouncing into Mike's basement, waving around a VHS copy of *The Shining*, she's not really sure what to make of what the battered case contains, based on the way Max and Lucas cheer,

Will laughs nervously, and Mike goes white as a sheet.

“Oh come on,” Dustin says, not even stopping for argument as he pushes the tape into the VHS and begins to rewind it, “I heard it’s barely even scary.” El bites her lip as she sees flashes of what she guesses is the movie - a maze of snow, long hallways, a man with a crazed smile - before Lucas tells them all not to look or it’ll ruin it: “You’ve gotta stop-rewind it, Dustin, this isn’t amateur hour.”

They settle in, and Max switches off the lights, responding only with a gleeful grin to Mike’s final round of protests.

As the movie unfolds, El’s entranced, finds herself mimicking their expressions like she does with her soap operas. She holds Mike’s increasingly sweaty hand the whole time, and when it all gets to be too much, she looks around the room, the breaking the spell by watching her friends’ faces in the soft, reassuring glow of the screen. She meets Mike’s eyes more than once, and each time she inches a little closer. He’s got a carefully neutral expression on his face, but his eyes are wider than the woman on the screen’s. El knows barely concealed fear when she sees it. Something in her stomach twists.

When it ends, they all sit in darkness for a moment, too shell-shocked to move, until Dustin demands that “someone turn the goddamn lights on, Jesus fucking Christ.”

El flicks them on so no one has to move from the huddle they’ve created, and their silence continues for a beat until Will turns to them and reverently announces, “That was awesome!”

“Are you kidding me? That was the most boring shit I’ve ever seen!” Dustin argues, his voice steady this time.

“Thirty seconds ago you begged us to turn the lights on, you big liar!” Lucas shoots back. “You were scared out of your mind!”

Max jumps in, flicking her long hair back, unbothered. “Don’t think I didn’t see you jump when that creep busted down the door with the axe!”

They lapse into predictable clamor, and something like normalcy

settles over the basement, if not for Mike's uncharacteristic silence, until Will turns to El and goes "What did you think?"

They're all quiet for a beat as she feigns pensiveness, before El leans back, releasing Mike's hand to cross her arms and say, "I saw Lucas jump too."

She can't suppress a smile as the boys and Max cheer and laugh and start their bickering all over again. The best part, though, is the way Mike laces their fingers together tightly when she reaches for his hand again, grateful.

El sees relief in the smile he gives her and idly wonders how one would go about destroying a videotape.

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Last summer, Hopper taught her how to catch fireflies, but she never really took to it, preferring to sit on the porch and watch their blinking lights float, untethered, above the grass.

This summer, Will thinks that the cabin might be the best spot for catching them, what with the surrounding wilderness ("There's hardly any people, so they won't be afraid," he says), and with the added company, El's able to find some joy in carrying the bugs around in their cupped hands -- just so long as they're set free.

Will arrives with Joyce, who wraps her up in a big hug and murmurs "hey, sweetheart," before settling on the front steps with Hopper, taking his proffered cigarette with a wry smile. (Hopper says that the smoke keeps the mosquitoes away. Joyce rolls her eyes.)

Lucas and Mike are next, their voices bouncing off the trees and announcing their presence long before they step over the tripwire. Mike tries to nervously skitter away under Hopper's watchful eye until El, with a pout, tugs on his shirt and pulls him into a proper greeting.



Dustin and Max arrive with Steve Harrington in tow, fiddling with his car keys, muttering about how it's too dark for the kids to be going anywhere alone, let alone off into the woods "God knows where". He lingers against a tree until Hopper calls him over with a beer.

The last traces of the sunset fade above the trees and the night comes alive. The music from Hopper's record player inside the house floats above the clearing, mixing with the chirp of crickets and quiet conversation and bursts of laughter.

El lets a firefly crawl to the end of her finger and fly off, watches as it blinks once before disappearing, and she is not afraid of the dark.

### **Author's Note:**

writing about VHS tapes made me feel so Old rip

comments/kudos always appreciated! send me prompts on tumblr @sansasummers if u want i'm on a kick for these kiddos~